

## Mooreville Ridge Insect and Disease Resilience Project

### **Mooreville Ridge Insect and Disease Resilience Project-Initiation Package for Endangered Species Act Consultation**

Plumas National Forest, Feather Ranger District

875 Mitchell Ave., Oroville, CA 95965

April 19, 2019

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This initiation package will review the proposed Mooreville Ridge Insect and Disease Resilience Project (Mooreville Project) in sufficient detail to determine to what extent the proposed action may affect any of the threatened, endangered, or proposed species and designated or proposed critical habitats listed below. In addition, the following information is provided to comply with statutory requirements to use the best scientific and commercial information available when assessing the risks posed to listed and/or proposed species and designated and/or proposed critical habitat by proposed federal actions. This initiation package is prepared in accordance with legal requirements set forth under regulations implementing Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (50 CFR 402; 16 U.S.C. 1536 (c)).

#### **Threatened, Endangered, Proposed Threatened or Proposed Endangered Species**

The following listed species may be affected by the proposed action:

Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*) E

#### **Species not included in consultation package**

The project was entered into the IPaC website on April 12, 2019 (Consultation Code: 08ESMF00-2019-SLI-1663, Event Code: 08ESMF00-2019-E-05303). Delta smelt (*Hypomesus transpacificus*), and California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) were included on the species list obtained from U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration National Marine Fisheries Service but was eliminated from analysis due to lack of species distribution, suitable habitat, and lack of designated critical habitat.

#### **Critical Habitat**

The action addressed within this document does not fall within critical habitat for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog.

#### **II. CONSULTATION TO DATE**

The Plumas National Forest (PNF) has not previously requested informal or formal consultation from FWS on the project. This biological assessment is prepared for appendage to the Programmatic Biological Opinion in Nine Forest Programs on Nine National Forests in the Sierra Nevada of California (FF08ESM00-2014-F-0557).

#### **III. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION**

The PNF proposes mechanical thinning operations on the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD), Butte and Plumas Counties. The area is located west and southwest of La Port and approximately 20 miles northeast of Challenge CA. (Figure 1: T20N, R8E, S4-7; T21N, R8E, S1,12,15, 21,22, 27-29, 32, 33; T21N, R9E S5-8,17-20; T20N, R7E S1,12; T20N R8E S4-7; T22N, R9E S31 USGS 7.5 minute topographic quadrangle maps: American House Strawberry, Valley Clipper

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Mills, and La Porte). Project activities will occur on National Forest Systems Lands between the years of 2020-2023. There are no permits required for this activity, however there is a foreseeable separate project within the same foot print, Devils Gap Forest Health Project (Devils Gap), details to follow. Elevations in the project area range between 3,700 and 5,900 feet. Annual precipitation ranges between 70-90 inches. Most of the area is comprised of Sierra mixed conifer forest (*Abies concolor*, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, *Pinus ponderosa*, *Pinus lambertiana*, *Calocedrus decurrens*, *Abies magnifica*, *Quercus kelloggii*, *Arbutus menziesii*). The action area (16,782 acres) was defined as all areas to be affected directly or indirectly by the proposed action. Suitable SNYLF habitat in the action area is 1,558 of which 154 acres are within treatment units. The 154 acres includes up to a distance of 25-meters from perennial and intermittent streams (Table 1 Figure 1).

Total project area 3,030 acres: mechanical thinning with biomass removal 2,091 acres and service work 939 acres. Mastication, hand cutting and prescribed fire, referred to as service work will occur within the 3,030 acres sometime in the future post- implementation of mechanical thinning activities.

Mechanical thinning will occur in stands that are overstocked, have poor regeneration, have high fuel loading, and or displaying signs of disease. Thinning areas will be subject to biomass removal of trees  $\leq 10''$  diameter at breast height (DBH) and grapple pile. Service work includes the removal of small  $\leq 10''$  DBH size trees or brush by either masticating or hand cutting and prescribed fire. Targeted grazing with goats could be used as needed in areas where acceptable fire behavior conditions do not exist and cannot be achieved through conventional methods.

Activities absent within the 25-meter buffer are timber harvesting activities and mastication. Fuel reduction activities allowed within the buffer include the use of loppers or chainsaws for the removal of small  $\leq 10''$  DBH size trees or brush. Piles of limbs and vegetation will be piled and burned outside of the buffer.

Table 1. Mooreville Project vegetation treatment acres.

Vegetation Management		Acres	<i>R. sierrae</i> suitable habitat acres
	Mechanical Thinning	2,091	112
	Service Work	939	42
<b>Total Acres</b>		<b>3,030</b>	<b>154</b>

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### Conservation Measures

Project Conservation Measures were developed to ensure compliance with Endangered Species Act and USDA Forest Service Region 5 direction. The following Conservation Measures will be followed to avoid or minimize the potential for adverse effects to the SNYLF.

- 1) Limited Operating Period (LOP) of October 15th through June 1st, or the first wetting rains (first 0.5 centimeter of autumn rain), will be implemented for all project activities within the 25-meter buffer. In the unlikely event wetting rains should occur during implementation, operations will stop. Work may subsequently resume when rain stops and after a dry period of 48 hours or more, and no further precipitation is forecast during time required to complete construction.
- 2) If any new species become listed, or a currently listed species is discovered within the action area, and may be adversely affected by activities, the FS will implement protection measures appropriate for the species, such as LOPs, as recommended by a FS biologist. If these circumstances occur, the Forest Service will request section 7 consultation if needed (i.e., if the proposed activities may affect the species).

### IV. STATUS OF THE SPECIES IN THE ACTION AREA

Distribution-wide species account (life history, spatial ecology, population status, threats) for the Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged frog (SNYLF) are provided in the USDA Forest Service Biological Assessment for the Programmatic Consultation between the Pacific Southwest Region and the Fish and Wildlife Service (Programmatic BA, Pages 31-37, June 16, 2014). Suitable SNYLF habitat in the action area is dominated by the South Fork Feather River downstream from the dam at Little Grass Valley Reservoir. There are no meadows in the action area classified as suitable for SNYLF.

There were four historic surveys (1951, 1960, 1982, and 2002) that recorded SNYLF detections in Rabbit Creek (USDA Forest Service NRIS AqS, Natural Resource Manager, accessed March 2019). Rabbit Creek has been surveyed since over multiple years and SNYLF have not been detected, only Foothill yellow-legged frogs (*R. boylii*). In the past decade the creeks, tributaries and distributaries have been surveyed in what is now the Mooreville Project. Results of those surveys have found no SNYLFs again only FYLFs. Surveys in 2018 resulted in one observation of a FYLF adult but no SNYLF were detected. Field crews collected data to identifying suitable habitat conditions, in particular, the criteria for surveying creeks and tributaries was based on priority of proposed treatment locations within or adjacent to suitable habitat. Perennial and intermittent streams within in the Devils Gap project area were surveyed (2018) and there were no frogs detected.

Critical habitat subunit 1D (Slate Creek 6,641 acres) in Plumas and Sierra Counties, California and borders the Mooreville Project. All project proposed activities are located > 2 km straight-line distance from occupied (critical) habitat (Final Rule Critical Habitat Pages 27-31 August 26, 2016).

## **V. ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE AND CUMMULATIVE EFFECTS**

### **Direct and Indirect Effects of Proposed Action**

#### ***Thin forest to meet fuels and forest health objectives (3,030 acres)***

##### Mechanical thinning (2,091 acres)

##### Service Work (939 acres)

Potential effects from activities associated with vegetation management were outline in the Programmatic BA, as were best management practices (BMPs) and standards and guidelines (S&Gs) (U.S.D.A. Forest Service. 2004) implemented at the project level to reduce negative impacts to individual SNYLFs and habitat (Pages 12-13, 37-48, June 16, 2014). Proposed mechanical thinning will adhere to all BMPs and S&Gs presented in the Programmatic BA. Mechanical (heavy) equipment, piling of material, and pile burning will be excluded from all suitable SNYLF suitable habitat. Fires will be lit outside SNYLF suitable habitat and allowed to back into suitable habitat if conditions allow. Although occupancy is unknown in the action area. Individuals may be directly or indirectly impacted by forest fuels and health activities if SNYLF should occupy the action area during implementation, and suitable habitat will experience short-to mid-term disturbance (<20 years) post implementation (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017 Programmatic BA, Pages 37-48). There are potential long-term benefits if proposed fuels and forest health treatments should reduce the risk of future high severity wildfire passing through this landscape.

### **Cumulative Effects**

The existing condition reflects changes on the landscape from all activities that have occurred in the past, and analysis of cumulative effects of the proposed action evaluates the impact of the project on the existing condition within the analysis area. Cumulative effects include the effects of future Federal, State, Tribal, local or private actions that are reasonably certain to occur in the action area. Cumulative effects to SNYLF could occur with the potential incremental loss of quantity and/or quality of habitat. Personal firewood cutting is a permitted ongoing activity in the analysis area along National Forest System Roads. Although project related activities may increase personal firewood cutting in the action area, potential impacts to SNYLF's and their habitat will be negligible given firewood cutting regulations are followed. Recreation activities are considered low within the action area and tend to be more regulated to the Valley Creek Botanical Special Interest Area found just outside the action area.

Devils Gap project CE overlaps in the action area, but none of the project overlaps with the Mooreville Project. Implementation of Davil's Gap is projected to occur in 2020 or 2021. Devils Gap was designed to remove the tree mortality caused by bark beetles along roadsides. The Mooreville Project was designed to reduce fuel loading in the forest and return fire back to the ecosystem. The risk of cumulative effects from the proposed ongoing and future activities will likely be negligible at this time based on the relatively small size of the project area in relation to habitat availability.

## **VI. CONCLUSION - DETERMINATIONS**

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The Mooreville Project vegetation treatments **May Affect, and is Likely to Adversely Affect *Rana sierrae***. The likelihood of direct impacts to the species is low, but may occur if individuals should occupy the action area during implementation. Adherence to Conservation Measures, BMPs and S&Gs will reduce the risk of both direct and indirect negative impacts to frogs and their habitat. Further, proposed transportation system management will improve watershed condition and thinning forests to reduce fuels and disease threats will reduce the risk of future high severity wildfire passing through the action area.

### VII. LITERATURE CITED

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2016. Final Rule Critical Habitat for the Sierra Nevada Yellow-Legged Frog, Northern DPS of the Mountain Yellow-legged frog and the Yosemite Toad Federal Register 59046 Vol. 81, No 166

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014. Amendment of the Programmatic Biological Opinion on Amendment of the Programmatic Biological Opinion on Nine Forest Programs on Nine National Forests in the Sierra Nevada of California for the Endangered Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged Frog, Endangered Northern Distinct Population Segment of the Mountain Yellow-legged Frog, and Threatened Yosemite Toad. FF08ESM00-2014-F-0557  
[https://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/Survey-Protocols-Guidelines/Documents/USFS\\_SNA\\_pbo.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/Survey-Protocols-Guidelines/Documents/USFS_SNA_pbo.pdf)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014. Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants; Endangered status for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog and the northern district population segment of the mountain yellow-legged frog, and threatened status for the Yosemite toad. Federal Register 79:24256-245310.

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### VIII. LIST OF CONTACTS/CONTRIBUTORS/PREPARERS

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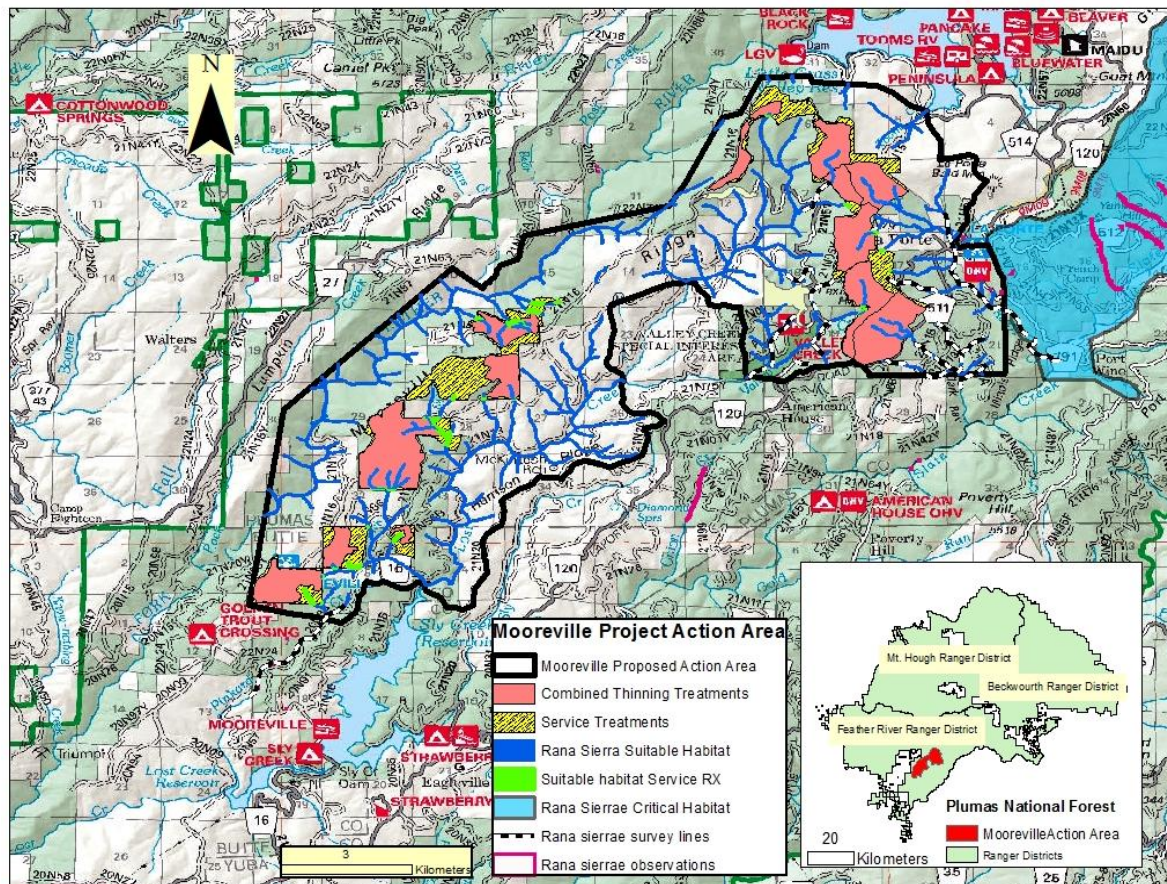


Figure 1. Mooreville Project treatment areas and *R. sierrae* action area, suitable and critical habitat surveys and observations.